

John C. Unseld Building
(Harpers Ferry National Historical Park)
NW Side of Shenandoah Street
Harpers Ferry
Jefferson County
West Virginia

HABS No. WV-170

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PHOTOGRAPHS
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
WRITTEN DESCRIPTIVE AND HISTORICAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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JOHN C. UNSELD BUILDING

Location Harpers Ferry National Monument, Harpers Ferry, West
Virginia, NW Side of Shenandoah Street near the inter-
section with Potomac Street.

Present Owner Government Owned.

Present Occupant None.

Present Use Vacant.

Brief Statement of Significance

The building was erected in the 1830's and is important as a landmark in the immediate vicinity of the capture of John Brown in 1859. In present day Harpers Ferry, the building lends considerably to the character of the town.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This structure was built on land originally owned by Robert Harper, who operated a ferry at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. The next owner, the Wager family, sold the land to Philip Coons who built the structure in 1838. He subsequently sold the property to a group of 51 men in 1840. These men were unable to fulfill the requirements of the sale and Coons repurchased the property in 1841. In 1856, John C. Unseld bought the property and retained ownership until the Civil War. The building stands in the immediate vicinity of the John Brown Raid occurrence, but while there is no evidence that the building was used by any of the participants, it was a part of the historic scene at the time.

There is a gap in the chain of ownership as presently known until 1945 when Josephine Murphy Bielaski inherited it from Mary Murphy. Bielaski sold the property to the State of West Virginia in 1953, who in turn deeded it to the Government on May 13, 1955.

The contractor of the Unsel Building is not known. No drawings or specifications are known to be in existence. The only pre-Civil War alteration known to have been made was the closing of the alley between the Unsel Building and the Gerard B. Wager Building. Considerable alterations occurred after the Civil War; a third floor was added and windows and porches have been changed. There are a number of photographs in the Photographic Files at the Harpers Ferry National Monument which establish the architectural character of the building as it appeared at the time of the Civil War. These views are indexed as HF-66, HF-11, HF-376, HF-141, and sketch HF-224. Supplementary material includes the Historic Building Site Survey Report, prepared by Historian (Park Supervisory) Charles W. Snell and dated May 28, 1958.

Prepared by H. H. Kissling
October 16, 1958

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The John C. Unsel Building is a brick wall-bearing structure with three floors and a basement. The building occupys 650 square feet, a ruined section at the rear occupys 850 square feet. It was built between the Gerard B. Wager Building and the William Anderson Building. The side walls of the Unsel Building are the adjacent sidewalls of the buildings mentioned.

While the fronts of the Wager and Anderson Buildings are in general on the same line, there are discrepancies both vertically and horizontally that have affected the plumb of the Unsel Building and forced the builders to warp the front in order to build between the two buildings. The foundations and basement walls are rubble masonry of local stone and extend above the grade to two feet at various points and are parged on the exterior. The front brick wall is 1' 3" thick and contains two interior chimneys. The rear brick wall is 1' 7" thick.

The building has been altered over the years to meet the demands of various occupants. A door opening from the second floor at the front and a joist line indicate that an early second floor porch extended over the side walk. A similar door situation occurs at the rear; in addition, the rear exterior of the building is covered with layers of plaster and white wash; the wall is marked by shadows of walls intersecting with it. This evidence would indicate that the ruins in the rear were tied to the existing building at one time.

The building has two front entrances, one glazed and flanked by two large display windows of a post Civil War period, leading to the first floor. The other door is paneled and leads into the entrance hall and stair well serving the second and third floors. The stair well and its entrance was added in 1846 closing the alley between the Wager Building and the Unseld Building. This addition is clearly evident in the masonry work in the basement. Following the Civil War a third floor was added making the building conform to the adjoining commercial structures. The roof sheathing was partially replaced and the roof surface completely replaced by the N.P.S. in 1956. The rafters and the two trusses that support the rafters, approximately at mid-point and tie into the partywalls on either side appear to have been constructed when the third floor was added.

The existing roof has an 8 to 12 pitch; a shadow on the Wager Building party wall indicates an older roof with a pitch of 9 to 19. If this roof is projected, it forms a simple ridge roof over the ruined section as well as the existing building. Holes regularly spaced along this shadow indicate that a truss system or purlins were used to support the rafters similar perhaps to present conditions. The existing cornices consist of brick courses laid as saw tooth dentils similar to the adjoining buildings.

The interior has been changed and the original cannot be determined without further investigation. The basement is div-

ided into two rooms by a bearing wall that supports the first floor joists. The room at the front of the building has a concrete floor, plastered walls, and a plaster over wood lath coiling. The rear room is untreated and contains a stairway shadow on the Wager Building party wall.

The first floor appears to have had four rooms. The largest extended across the front of the building. This room has a patterned tin ceiling. A partition now divides this room. As the ceiling carries thru, it is evident that it was one room originally. The walls are finished in lath and plaster and in some areas remnants of wall paper are evident; the ceilings in the remaining rooms are finished in lath and plaster.

The second and third floors appear to have always been living quarters. The rooms are finished in lath and plaster and the major doors between rooms are sliding and post Civil War. The doors are paneled and finished to simulate walnut; none of the original hardware exists. The floors are tongue and groove boards with widths ranging from 2 1/2" to 6".

The two chimneys at the front of the building provide fireplaces on the second floor and have stove thimbles on the third floor. At present one fireplace is closed and the other is equipped with a cast iron Latrobe type stove. These two chimneys do not show above the roof at the present time. A third chimney is toward the rear and along the William Anderson Building party wall. This contains a fireplace that is located in the rear room

of the basement. The chimney has stove thimbles on the other three floors. Remnants of later day electrical wiring remain.

The John C. Unseld Building stands in downtown Harpers Ferry on the Northwest side of Shenandoah Street near the intersection with the Potomac Street. The building faces South-Southeast and its long dimension is North 50 degrees West.

Prepared October 16, 1958